



Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

THE NATIONAL FOOD SURVEY: AN INTRODUCTION

The National Food Survey (NFS) was originally set up in 1940 to monitor the adequacy of the diet of urban working class households. It evolved into a continuous sampling enquiry into the domestic food consumption and expenditure of all private households, regardless of class. This open data release covers the years from 1974 to 2000, when the National Food Survey and Family Expenditure Surveys were merged into the Expenditure and Food Survey.

The long period of time is reflected in the changing language within the Survey and Survey documents, and is recorded in the Annual National Food Survey Reports that will be published at a later date. In the early years the diary was expected to be kept by “the housewife”, who at that time might have been assumed to be at home and prepared to complete the log book, rather than “the Head Of Household”. By 1980 the terminology had changed to suggest that the log-book might be kept by “the housewife (or other nominee)”. In 1983 the report records “The sole informant in each household is the person, female or male, principally responsible for domestic arrangements. For convenience, that person is referred to as the “housewife”. In 1990 the term was finally changed to “main diary-keeper” (MDK).

In 1974 the NFS covered only England, Scotland and Wales, but it was extended in 1996 to cover Northern Ireland. At the beginning of this period the survey excluded food purchased to be eaten outside the home (such as fish and chips, ice cream), and excluded all confectionery, soft drinks, and alcoholic drinks that might be purchased by anyone other than the housewife. “The housewife is asked to give particulars of the number and type of meals obtained and consumed outside the house by each member of the family, but not of the cost or composition of such meals; she is also asked to record the quantity of milk supplied to her children under the School Milk Scheme”¹. In 1992 confectionery, alcoholic drinks and soft drinks brought home for consumption were added to the Survey, and in 1994 an additional Survey was begun to extend the National Food Survey coverage to food eaten outside the home, although it did not cover Northern Ireland.

¹ *Household Food Consumption and Expenditure: 1974 Annual Report of the National Food Survey Committee, HMSO*. The School Milk Scheme provided free milk to children in special circumstances such as low family income, and replaced earlier schemes. The National Food Survey was changed in 1971 to record the amount of milk drunk by each family member so as to review the effects of these changes in supply.

Structure of the Survey

The method for sampling evolved throughout the years, and is too complex to summarise here for the entire period. Details for each survey year will be available when the Annual Reports are published online. In 1974 the first stage involved selecting 46 Parliamentary Constituencies from England, Scotland and Wales, then selecting polling districts or combinations of polling districts within the constituencies, then finally addresses were selected from the polling districts. There was a General Election in 1974, and because fieldwork was not allowed during Election periods, some polling districts were excluded, as were some for operational reasons. In later years the addresses were drawn by postcode sectors from the Small Users Postcode Address File, with probability proportional to size of the sector (measured as the number of addresses in England and Wales, and by multiple occupancy indicator, which gives the number of households at an address, in Scotland) and allocated equally to months. The sample was stratified by three variables: the 24 regions that comprise the Government Office Regions Metropolitan split; the proportions of heads of household in SocioEconomic Groups 1 - 5 or 13 (in 3 bands); and the proportions of households with no car. Each year half of the selected sectors were retained from the previous year's sample and half replaced by a new selection from the same stratum. By regularly changing the households surveyed, information was obtained continuously throughout the year, apart from a short break over the Christmas period and during General Election periods.

Interviewers were sent out to visit the addresses that were selected, and sometimes they found that the address was unsuitable for survey, such as company premises, institutions; or that the address contained more than one household, or that there were no occupants, or that the property had been demolished.

Each household was visited by a trained interviewer and asked to participate on a voluntary basis, without payment, for one week only. The housewife/main diary keeper was asked to complete a specially designed log-book (sometimes called the diary) in which they recorded the description, quantity and for purchases the cost of food intended for human consumption which entered the household during the week it participated in the Survey (see the samples such as NFS 1975 diary questionnaire notes.pdf). In addition, the interviewer would record information about the household composition and income of household members on a separate questionnaire. In addition to the log-book of purchases the housewife/main diary keeper was asked to keep a record of the people present at each meal, including visitors, and a description of the type (but not quantities) of food served, plus a record of the number and nature of any meals obtained outside the home by any family member, but not the cost or composition in early years of the Survey.

All of these log-books and questionnaires were collected and the data from them was entered into the computer systems available at that time, whether by punched card, punched tape or direct keyboard entry.

Open Data Release

The databases that Defra is releasing as Open Data are the only remaining data in electronic form. They were stored in Microsoft Access database format as five-year databases apart from the last year, 2000. For each year there was a standard set of data tables:

- Diary data (the summarised records of each purchase of food for consumption in the home, taken from the log-books)
- Household data (the characteristics of the household such as location, occupation of Head of Household and Housewife (if present) etc., taken from the interviewer's questionnaire)
- Mealsout data (record of all meals taken outside the home, taken from the log-books)
- Visitor data (record of all visitors to the home, taken from the questionnaire)
- Person data (record of each member of the household such as age, gender, occupation, taken from the questionnaire)

Some changes have been made to make these suitable for release as Open Data.

All databases have been split into separate single years. The data is published as tab-separated value text files.

The Person Data is not available for Open Data release, as it was felt to be too disclosive. Some of the person data fields have been extracted and are supplied as a new table so that details of whether anyone in the household was pregnant at the time of the Survey, and whether there were any children under the age of 2, are available.

In the Household data, gross weekly household income fields have been removed, and replaced by a field that divides each household's net income by a weighting factor based on the household composition by age, then places the result into deciles. Any household with more than 10 members has been removed from the data. In addition, the age fields for the Head of Household and Housewife have been grouped into 7 bands. The band definitions can be found in two lookup tables: when the data was being processed it was found that the recording of ages had changed, so it was necessary to amend the processing and record the banding change. Several individual fields relating to benefits such as Income Support, Income Supplement, Housing Benefit, Family Credit or Working Families Tax Credit have been combined into one field stating whether a household was in receipt of any of these benefits or not. Some fields were also found to be corrupted with non-numeric characters so these have been removed.

When the data was to be used for statistical purposes within the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (now replaced by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) it was combined with a table of nutrient conversion factors for the specific year of data (used to estimate household nutrition) and a number of lookup tables to translate the short field codes in the original data tables into longer more meaningful terms. These lookup tables are supplied as is, straight from the original reference database, and have not been cleaned or modified other than where it was necessary to clarify meanings for evaluation during the processing of the main data tables. The abbreviation DCV in the name of these tables stands for Demographic Classification Value. Some additional tables and documentation have been created to try to clarify meanings and changes in the usage of fields during the period, to describe the income decile by household composition and age banding that has been adopted for disclosure control purposes, and to provide additional household data fields without compromising the person data table.

Note that it was not possible to say whether all of the food purchased was actually consumed.

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